Chapter Five

Poetry of Emily Dickinson

"This is my letter to the world
That never wrote to Me -
The simple News that Nature told -
With tender Majesty

"Her message is committed
To Hands I cannot see -
For love of Her-Sweet-countrymen-
Judge tenderly- of Me"  (Poem 441)

Having made her dwelling in Nature's domain, Emily learned more of her secrets and to "tell all the truth / but tell it slant," (Poem 1129) she used an unconventional poetic medium. She stood apart from the mainstreams of American literati of whom she had access to, to communicate Nature's unblemished truths in cryptic, startling sentences. Ultimately she did not care for any tender judgement, but rejected by her mentors, spoke the universal truth as much as was revealed to her genius-truths about Fame, Love, Death, Immortality and God.

Emily withdrew from the world to write poetry. Her fifty-six years of existence was devoted to convey messages she learnt through the mental experiences she underwent as a woman through the different stages of her life. Had she lived the experiences, there would have been no
poetry. In corporeal isolation, she lived the poetic life to its full. Her literary career is one long understanding of facts conveyed at different periods of her life.

Emily wrote a great many letters to people in different walks of life - family, friends, clergymen, mentors and literary advisors. There are as many letters as there are poems. They are messages to certain individuals of whom she need not ask for any tender judgement as her poetry apparently needed.

I. The Various Phases in Emily Dickinson's Literary Career

Before the Eighteen Sixties less than two hundred versification is done by Emily before her thirtieth year. The earliest are two verse valentines full of humour and happy adolescence. Her late twenties saw a reasonable output with serious themes of Death and Life. But they are mere feelers for the great poetic output that shall upsurge in the early part of the following decade. In 1853, she had lost her earliest intimate friend and master, Benjamin Franklin Newton. The shadow of death has already been imprinted upon Emily's mind and many express a sense of loss, deprivation and hope. She is not a religious rebel here.

The influence of the Bronte sisters is also felt. Their tragic lives and poetry must have affected her. The physical pain of the Brontes is compared to Emily's mental agony. The religious and personal alienation she experienced was alike. A few poems refer to the death of Charlotte Bronte. But it was Emily Bronte's fiery and indomitable spirit that appealed to Emily's own inner tempest. At this time she has vaguely come to realise her destiny as a would-be
unrecognised poet. She has known the incapacity of her family, especially Edward, to encourage her dreams. In futile hope, the tragedy of the Brontës must have left an impression on her mind.

Scenes of Death are also depicted with a scientist's accuracy. The flow and ebb of Sue's friendship has also found space. Nature and various aspects of life like fame, captivity, war is all dealt with mathematical precision. The changing seasons and their tints upon the colours of nature are painted with a botanist's eye view.

These years were years of self-awareness and reconsideration for Emily. She is aware of the futility of kind rebellion on her part against the established dogmas and the uselessness of choosing a domestic front to live out her life doing household chores. Hence with youthful candour and alert ears and eyes, she takes her first step towards what will become her life-long passion - her poetry. It begins to breathe a freer air, far from the chains of traditionalism and henceforth we shall see it fly.

II. Early works

Poem 13 reveals her hitherto unmarked position in the family, especially in the eyes of Edward Dickinson. She is the dutiful daughter during the day and evades sleep at night because she ought to be writing poetry, to speak aloud her innermost aspirations. Hence her "Morning has not occurred!"

"Sleep is supposed to be
By souls of sanity

123
The shutting of the eye
..............
Mom is supposed to be
By people of degree
The breaking of the Day.

Morning has not occurred!
...................

Poem 23 speaks pathetically, probably mourning the loss of Benjamin Newton, whom she missed for a great many years after his death. The last lines could mean a harsh judgement upon Edward who hastened Newton's departure from Amherst.

"I had a crimson Robin -
Who sang full many a day
But when the woods were painted,
He, too, did fly away -
Time brought me other Robins -
Their ballads were the same -
Still, for my missing Troubadour
I kept the "house at hame

"My story has a moral-
I have a missing friend -
"Pleiad" its name, and Robin,
And guinea in the sand.
And when this mournful ditty
Accompanied with tear -
Shall meet the eye of traitor
In country far from here -
Grant that repentance solemn
May seize upon his mind -
And he "no" consolation
Beneath the sun may find."

In eighteen fifty-five Charlotte Bronte died at the age of thirty-nine. Poem 148 speaks of her death and salvation. This poem in all probability must have been written in 1855, stated otherwise in the Johnson edition

"All overgrown by cunning moss,
All interspersed with weed,
The little cage of "Currer Bell"
In quiet "Haworth" laid.

"Gathered from many wanderings -
Gethsemane can tell
Thro' what transporting anguish
She reached the Asphodel!

"Soft fall the sounds of Eden
Upon her puzzled ear -
Oh what an afternoon for Heaven,
When "Bronte" entered there!"

But it was Emily Bronte's fiery spirit that attracted Emily Dickinson. Bronte's vision of the universal oneness of nature is Dickinson's own. There was one difference - Bronte's faith was strong and Dickinson's was not.

Bronte's last poem "No coward Soul is Mine" may be compared to Dickinson's poem 127.

"Though Earth and Moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And thou were left alone
Every existence would exist in thee

"There is no room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed"

(No Coward Soul is Mine)
"Houses" - so the Wise Men tell me -
"Mansions"! Mansions must be warm!
Mansions cannot let the tears in,
Mansions must exclude the storm!

"Many Mansions." by "his Father,"
I didn't know him: snugly built
Could the children find the way there -
Some, would even trudge tonight!

The addresses of the Divine by these two poets vary, but the essence is the same.

"And if I pray, the only prayer,
That moves my lips for me
Is - "Leave me the heart that now I bear
And give me liberty" (Emily Bronte)

"Papa above!
Regard a Mouse
O'er powered by the Cat!
Reserve within thy kingdom
A "Mansion" for the Rat!" (Poem 61)
The casual reference of her heavenly father only hides her deep religious turmoil in her heart, just as Bronte's demure, reticent invocations hid the passion she expressed throughout in her novel *Wuthering Heights*.

Note with what scientific accuracy she expresses an idea in Poem 108.

"Surgeons must be very careful
When they take the knife!
Underneath their fine incisions
Stirs the Culprit - Life!"

Douglas Duncan in his critical study of Emily Dickinson quotes a passage where Charlotte Bronte exclaimed after the discovery of her sister Emily Bronte's poems. It goes thus, "Something more than surprise seized me, - a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, nor at all like the poetry women generally write. I thought them condensed and terse, vigorous and genuine. To my ear, they had also a peculiar music - wild, melancholy, and elevating." Duncan further adds, "the parallel between the two Emilys has an obvious force in so far as both women, in the course of isolated lives, turned to writing as a means of proving the reality of their inward vision. Of more particular interest is the deliberate way in which each activated a "peculiar music," instinctively rejecting conventional literary models for the purpose of self-expression. It was the American poet who carried this rejection furthest."

III. The Great Harvest (1861-1870)

Emily Dickinson's poetic output reached its zenith in the early sixties. Nearly a thousand poems were written during this period. The year eighteen sixty-two alone saw the composing of
almost three hundred and more verses, one-third of the total output of the decade. In this creative period, her withdrawal was also complete and productive. She wrote unceasingly of Life, its deprivations and its promises.

This period is also a transition period in her poetic career. Having realised the futility of seeking appreciation from Edward Dickinson, her father, she turns outside, with lingering looks backward, to the literary men of the times. One prominent figure was Thomas Wentworth Higginson. His article in the *Atlantic Monthly* of April 1862 caught Emily's attention. All of a sudden Emily realised the need for reference to a stranger. She felt she could not go on pursuing her life's dream in closeted loneliness. Having read Higginson's article, she decided to lay bare her poetic wares before him. That she received no encouragement from him forms a major part in the rest of her hidden career.

Samuel Bowles, editor of *the Springfield Republican* and a family friend of the Dicksons also influenced Emily's poetry. The letters to him always contain a verse or two, but Bowles never had encouraged or applauded her. He was the only friend who was jovial and familiar with Emily. That Emily had written her Master letters to him is absurd. His approval would have been a profound respite to Emily's self-inflicted isolation, but it was not there. Her letters to him speak of an intimacy, perhaps a liking for his carefree, jolly manners so unlike her own.

If Higginson, the critic urged her to normalise her verses and add rhyme and metre to it, Bowles in his good-natured, worldly-wise manner chose to ignore her poetry. Emily, with fortitude, bore the insults, which were only an extension of her father's denial. But the great
A number of poems bordering on the romantic aspects of life could not have been written had she not met Charles Wadsworth, the noted Presbyterian clergyman of Philadelphia. The poems that speak of passion, unrequited love and fulfilment would not have materialised from outer space, if Emily did not respond to some kind of emotion in actual life. That she did and the closest, with whom she shared such a feeling, is Charles Wadsworth. Themes of Death and Immortality also began to occupy a predominant position in her heart. Letters to friends and close acquaintances were written and sent with gifts and sweet delicacies and in some of the letters to closest friends she reveals her inner turmoil and her obsession with after-life. At this stage, loss of friends through death was borne with accepted bravery and the still remaining curiosity as to their last moments.

IV. The Works

"The nearest Dream recedes-unrealized-
The Heaven we chase,
Like the June Bee-before the School Boy,
Invites the Race-
Stoops-to an easy Clover-
Dips-evades-teases-deploys-
Then-to the Royal Clouds
Lifts his light Pinnace-
Heedless of the Boy-
Staring-bewildered-at the mocking sky-"  (Poem. 319)
This is one of the poems Emily sent to the learned literary critic, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson after reading his provocative article *Letter to a Young Contributor*, where he speaks of "the mute inglorious Miltons of this sphere may in some other sing their Paradise as Found." Emily did the reverse by responding. Furthermore she sent him poems for scrutiny and also wrote a remarkable poem, portraying his thought in the essay. The *School-Boy* here could be Emily herself. It could not be a *School- Girl* for schoolgirls of Amherst still had to do their household chores and find little time to chase June bees and feel the defeat.

In poem 327, bound with nature imageries reveal her own inner quest for something above the gifts of nature.

"Before I got my eye put out
I liked as well to see -
As other Creatures, that have Eyes
And know other way -

"But were it told to me - Today -
That I might have the sky
For mine - I tell you that my Heart
Would split, for size of me -

................................

"The Motions of the Dipping Birds -
The Morning's Amber Road -
For mine - to look at when I liked -
The News would strike me dead -

"So safer-guess-with just my soul
Upon the Window pane-
Where other Creatures put their eyes -
Incautious - of the Sun -"

We can explicate the poem thus - Emily was not looking at the sight before her - the sights of the "Dipping Birds" and the reflection of the rising sun upon the road are common sights about which other poets sing. If Higginson tells her that she can only follow their footsteps, it would kill her. But she wanted to look above - to the unrevealing sky, to scrutinise its hidden depths and write about it. Her heart would burst with gratitude if Higginson saw her point of view. But already she began to sense his uneasiness over her verses and takes a sad resignation.

Richard Benson Sewall gives another insight to the poem - "Higginson was a devoted lover of nature, and his observation of it was careful and precise; but compared with this, his love was a flirtation. Nor did his favourite Romantic poets, who, like himself, emphasised nature's soothing or healing effects often come so close to the overwhelming, even mortal, experience when for the supremely sensitive soul, mere observation becomes possession and man and nature are one."

Emily's famous definition of poetry is unique in bearing and the actuality of experience is embedded in these lines - "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can
warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?"  

She plainly uncovered her vision of poetry but in her poetry itself, she only said as much as this one.

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise.

"As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind -"  (Poem 1129)

His prediction that she would be remembered by her own verse on which he conferred the title *Vanished*, proved false

"She died - *this* was the way she died
And when her breath was done
Took up her simple wardrobe
And started for the sun.
"Her little figure at the gate
The Angels must have spied.
Since I could never find her
Upon the mortal side."  (Poem 159)

Ironically Higginson, a leading liberal figure of the times, a noted preacher and reformer, is remembered because of her.

Samuel Bowles - A man of action and a prominent journalist and politician. Samuel was also a family friend of the Dickersons. Emily had sent about thirty-five letters and fifty poems to him. It is also assumed that the Master Letters, three of them, which were not sent, were supposedly written to Samuel Bowles. A strange phenomenon it was that the reticent Emily and a vibrant Samuel were intimate as much as was ethically possible. But so was Edward Dickinson filled with so many contradictions. Edward was at once an eminent citizen as well as one who "seems to [Emily] often the oldest and the oddest sort of a foreigner," who "stares in a curious sort of bewilderment though [Emily] speak a thought quite as old as his daughter...." 4 Samuel was more her contemporary and though he shared Edward's exuberance on the one side, he was not inaccessible to Emily and he possessed a charm to entice ladies of different temperaments.

In 1858, she wrote to Samuel, "My friends are my estate. Forgive me then the avarice to hoard them." 5 A close associate and friend of his, Maria Whitney, a woman of society with intelligence and wit, was also a friend of Emily Dickinson. A handful of letters was sent to Miss. Whitney from 1878 sharing the sorrow in the loss of Samuel Bowles. Her letters to Samuel
extended over three decades, from 1858 until his passing away in January 1878. She sensed from her early correspondence that Bowles too would eventually fail her as a preceptor, just as Edward Dickinson has done before him. Nevertheless, she remained loyal to him and his family till the very end.

In a letter to Austin, perhaps in the early eighteen sixties, he conveys his remembrances to Emily in these lines, "............ to the Queen Recluse my especial sympathy - that she has "overcome the world." - Is it really true that they sing "Old Hundred" and "Alleluia" perpetually, in heaven-ask her; and are dandelions, asphodels, and Maiden's the standard flowers of the ethereal?" This message could have hurt Emily deeply.

In 1862 Emily sent a small poem with a letter.

"Faith is a fine invention
When gentlemen can see!
But microscopes are prudent
In an emergency." (Poem 185)

adding "Don't you think you and I should be shrewder to take the mountain road?

"That bareheaded life, under the grass, worries one like a wasp."  

Probably she must have enclosed some poems to be laid bare before the eyes of a world-wise journalist and editor. Bowles, the product of an age of extreme religious fervour and
mediocrity in literature, found it hard to accept the unique quality of her verses. In the short four-line stanza Emily reveals her present predicament, her advice to her friend and a fact which she learned through the hard way. When life seems under man's control he invents faith to add divinity to life. Faith becomes an appendage to life. But Emily is so desperately in need of recognition for her poetry, since she has sacrificed every other pleasure in life for its sake. Hence she urges Samuel to scrutinise her verses, and not blindly see them in faith. If he applies faith to them, he would fail. Just as microscopes come handy in cases where minute details are required, Emily's verses too need detailed probing.

Sewall weighs the poem in his criticism thus - "..................she cannot live on the "faith" that somehow, someday, some editor will see her work for what it is and publish it. She has run out of patience: this is an "Emergency" Get a microscope!................ Would it not be "prudent," "shrewder," for her poems to take the "Mountain Road" (the pass between the range of hills that separates Amherst and Springfield) for publication in the Republican? Time is running out. There may be a sense of urgency because of Bowles' health, which had been precarious for several years."

Poem 250 probably sent to Bowles further shows her resignation to hopeless dreams of present times.

"I shall keep singing

Birds will pass me

On their way to Yellower Climes -

Each - with a Robin's expectation -
I-with my Red breast -
And my Rhymes -

"Late - when I take my place in summer -
But - I shall bring a fallen tune -
Vespers - are sweeter than Matins - Signor -
Morning - only the seed of Noon -"

The callousness of the publishers failed to brook any sympathy for her plaintive wailing. Bowles was too preoccupied with the 'thorns and briers" of this world to hear the agonised cries of the singing bird, that is Emily. That she continued to write opens a vista of her hopeful mind, which believed that "Morning" is "only the seed of Noon."

V. Charles Wadsworth

"He was a Dusk Gem, born of troubled waters, astray in any crest below" - wrote Emily to James Clark, a friend who shared the sorrow of Wadsworth's loss. After Benjamin Newton, Wadsworth appears to be a man who shared many of Emily's ideas. But it was she who sought him as early as 1854 when they first met. It was through his sermons that the first acquaintance began which became "an intimacy of many years with the beloved Clergyman." His sermon, his enigmatic personality and his literary tastes had an effect on Emily, which lasted, till his death. When she first met Wadsworth, she was passing through a personal crisis - she had lost her dearest friend Benjamin Newton the year before - the "friend who taught her immortality." On the religious front too, Emily's heart was in turmoil - "The shore is safer, A., but I love to buffet the
sea-I can count the bitter wrecks here in these pleasant waters, and hear the murmuring winds, but oh, I love the danger! You are learning control and firmness. Christ Jesus will love you more. I'm afraid he don't love me anyl..." 10. Wadsworth appealed to her both as a preacher and an intimate friend.

George Frisbie Whicher in his critical work "This was a Poet," the first full-length study of Emily's life and works calls Wadsworth a man whose "whole career was lived as strictly as Milton's, ever in his great Task-master's eye." He further added, "But by 1862 she was conscious that she would no longer share the beliefs that her family accepted ..................... The crumbling of her childhood faith, which she was too honest not to admit, must have disturbed her deeply at times, for her nature was more religious that she knew. In her hours of uncertainty, when the God of her fathers looked very much like "an eclipse," Wadsworth could offer her soothing counsels and the peace of vicarious certitude. In that haven, for a time at least, she could moor her tempest-shaken bark."

Emily's attitude towards revered things corresponded with Wadsworth's own. Though he was a preacher of accepted worth and she a woman who was fast withdrawing herself into the world of her essentials, Emily found a soul mate in the preacher-clergyman when the externals are unveiled. Her peculiar sense of humour found expression in Wadsworth's sermons. Her practical view of the Bible echoed in his speeches. Above all Emily's search for the truth was also Wadsworth's own, though he had an unquestioning faith in Christ. Emily, in contrast, had a faith for which she sought reasons and proofs. Wadsworth also withdrew when he was not preaching or ministering. This nature appealed to Emily's sensibility that heaved a sigh of relief at having at last found a master upon whom she could lay her queries. He was also to her the "fugitive whom
to know was life". Richard B Sewall writes, "It would seem that mystery faced mystery in the meeting of these two people, and this may have been part of his fascination for her. It is in his sombre or tragic moods that Emily seems spiritually closest to Wadsworth." In Wadsworth, Emily found, above all, "a fellow sufferer," the quality of whose suffering had in common with hers that it was borne in silence.

In the poem *My Life had stood- a Loaded Gun* Emily could speak with controlled emotion the crisis she passed through in the spring of 1862 when Wadsworth left to the Calvary Church at San Francisco.

"My Life had stood-a Loaded Gun-
In Corners-till a Day
The Owner passed-identified-
And carried Me away-

And now We roam  in Soverign Woods -
And now we hunt the Doe -
And every time I speak for Him -
The Mountains straight reply -

"And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow-
It is a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through -
"And when at Night - Our good Day done -
I guard My Master's Head -
"T'is better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow-to have shared -

"To foe of His-I'm deadly foe-
None stir the second time -
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
Or an emphatic Thumb -

"Though I than He-may longer live
He longer must-than I-
For I have but the power to kill
Without - the power to die -"  (Poem 754)

She was aware of Wadsworth's delicate health for when he visited her previously to take leave, he answered on query. "My life is full of dark secrets.......I am liable at any time to die." The Loaded Gun can imply her desperate need to break forth into poetry all her unfulfilled dreams and hopes. The meeting with Wadsworth the previous spring could have ignited her muse. She had also then written to Higginson and he had replied that she "delay to publish." Further back, Samuel Bowles had also teased and wounded her, calling her 'the Queen Recluse'. So from these hurtful corners, the true Owner of her heart, namely Wadsworth, gave her the poetic dimensions she required.
So now she wrote of Nature's dalliance with life as she roamed in Soverign Woods with her beloved and now again she also spotted her Vesuvian face that told all.

The word Vesuvius often occurs in her poems.

"A crater I may contemplate,

Vesuvius at home."

Henry W Wells points out "The verse of this tightly restrained New Englander contains many images drawn from volcanic fires. Significantly enough, volcanoes fascinated and haunted her. Their "reticent" ways, periodically giving place to violent eruption, paralleled her own experiences and the behaviour of her friends and family." 14

The last two stanzas bring forth the power that lay behind the delicate frame of the poet. She is capable of trying even witchcraft against the forces that came in opposition against her beloved clergyman. Because of him who brought forth her burst of song, it will live, because it has been written, wrought from true, painful emotions. Her word often can be a weapon to kill, but cannot die. She realised the immortality of the written word that can give her peace from her present grief.

Judith Farr has given various interpretations to the poem. The man in all assumptions is Samuel Bowles. - "Owner", however suggests sexual love, and to anyone versed in the language of Emily Dickinson, it inflects one of her central themes," and she quotes from poem 1028.
Further. "For that reason, and because there is such heroic intimacy between the gun and Master, one can see this as a poem of sexual love that emphasises comradery, robust equality. The last quatrain is explicated thus - "In one way, the stanza points up the incontrovertible difference between the mechanical gun and the human owner. He is the complete being, having both the power to die and the power to kill (even without her help). For all her fusion with him in their acts of love and death, she must still depend on him; she must be "carried." Thus this poem is often read-and read brilliantly-as a revelation of the limitations experienced by women under patriarchy, or even of the dependency of the female artist who needs male masters like Higginson to help her exercise her powers." 15

Poem 756 also speaks of a situation, which wrought a blessing from its despair.

"One Blessing had I than the rest
So larger to my Eyes
That I stopped gauging - satisfied -
For this enchanted size -

"It was the limit of my Dream -
The focus of my Prayer -
A perfect - paralysing Bliss -
Contented as Despair -

...............

"I knew no more of Want - or Cold -
Phantasms both become
For this new Value in the Soul -
Supremest Earthly Sum -

"The Heaven below the Heaven above -
Obscured with ruddier Blue -
Life's Latitudes leant over - full -
The Judgment perished - too -

"Why Bliss so scantily disburse -
Why Paradise defer -
Why Floods be served to Us - in Bowls -
I speculate no more-" (Poem 756)

No more visions does the poet need to write. One large vision has blocked out every other form. The meeting with Wadsworth and its memory must have wrought a picture in her mind that seemed out of proportions with every other form of life on Earth. Thus experiencing a *perfect-paralysing Bliss* - her isolation become complete in as much as that she saw a bluer Heaven with no fear of *Judgment Day* which the Puritans instilled into every heart. If she does not withdraw at this crucial hour, her brighter vision may fade.
Richard Wilbur in his critical essay *Sumptuous Destitution*, a phrase taken from Emily's poem, remarks on the lines *A perfect, paralysing Bliss - Contented as Despair* - thus "We often assent to the shock of a paradox before we understand it, but these lines are so just and so concentrated as to explode their meaning instantly in the mind. They did not come so easily, I think, to Emily Dickinson. .......... the poet had worked toward them through much study of the way certain emotions can usurp consciousness entirely, annulling our sense of past and future, cancelling near and far, converting all time and space to a joyous or grievous here and now. It is in their ways of annihilating time and space that bliss and despair are comparable."  

In poem 341, Emily perfectly elaborates an emotion, an action and a remembrance set in order after a personal experience of pain. Such an explication is impossible if the poet herself has not felt it.

"After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

"The Feet, mechanical, go round -
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -
"This is the Hour of the Lead -

Remembered, if outlived,

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -

First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go."

The cemetery image and the burial image can be noticed in the lines. It is also a feeling narrated after a particular personal crisis, even after the formal feeling of numbness and letting go experienced by the person. So it is twice removed from reality. Parts of the human body, the elements of nature, all unite to present the chain reaction resultant of grief. The image of freezing and snow occurs in many of her poems. It may be that she so often passes through rejection and despair that the numbness felt is compared with snow and chilliness.

In poem 352 the poet is more oratorical. It is different from the dead feeling experienced in the former poem. There is resignation but no compromise in the following lines.

"Perhaps I asked too large -

I take - no less than skies -

For Earths, grow thick as

Berries, in my native town -

"My Basket holds - just - Firmaments -

Those - dangle easy - on my arm,

But smaller bundles- Cram."
John Cody in his detailed analysis presents a critical hypothesis from a biographer-pseudoanalyst's point of view. The poem *After Great Pain* is subjected to various interpretations in Cody's hypothesis bearing that title. In the early chapter, Cody points out, "......... a threnody to a vanquished ego and to a paralysed emotional life—is an example of Emily Dickinson's self observations at its most clinical and chilling......... How is it possible to believe that the poet did not undergo the terrible prostration that she appears here to commemorate?................. By what creative magic could she, high on the safe shore of normality, plumb such depths of suffering? The simplest answer is apparently the least generally acceptable: the poems are the distillation of actual circumstances. They portray faithfully the terror of a mind collapsing under pressures that exceed its endurance. The mind is Emily Dickinson's own." 17

VI. The Last Decades

"Go slow, my soul, to feed thyself
Upon his rare approach -
Go rapid, lest Competing Death
Prevail upon the Coach -
Go timid, should his final eye
Determine thee amiss -
Go boldly - for thou paid'st his price
Redemption for a Kiss-" (Poem 1297 )
The last decades saw a considerable output of verses in Emily's workshop. But they lacked the frenzy and intoxication that attended the poems of the early sixties. This was the period in which Emily came to terms with Death, the great Leveller. One by one of her most cherished members sank into oblivion that brought her tidings of her own sinking that will soon come to pass. The themes of Death and Immortality became crystallised in her imagination as her father, mother and closest friends perished. That which obsessed her from her early teens now became almost a passionate quest for which she found no sure answer till her final day.

Edward Dickinson passed away in 1874 and a considerable dearth is noticed in Emily's poetry. She never got over his parting. He was eventually followed by Samuel Bowles in 1878, her mother and Charles Wadsworth in 1882, Otis Phillips Lord in 1884 and Helen Hunt Jackson in 1885. These deaths affected her very deeply. Her final collapse was when her favourite nephew, Gilbert Dickinson, son of Austin, passed away in 1883. Bright's Disease affected her and finally succumbed to it in her coma on May 15, 1886.

The Works

"A Death-blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become -
Who had they lived, had died, but when
They died, Vitality began" (Poem 816)
When Edward Dickinson died, the most dominant influence in Emily's poetic career disappeared. The Death-blow is the numbness the poet experiences in her career after the death of Edward. But it is also a Life Blow to Some as Emily, for she is not required to be a dutiful daughter anymore. She can now become alive to write the whole livelong day. The death of Edward gave her freedom, but the life of her poetry is gone, which is greater than Death. Vitality could mean the external freedom she can now experience without catering to Edward's whims. But the Vitality of her poems is gone. She felt that the years of possession by the Muse, which began in the early sixties till Edward's death is leaving her. With the deaths of Samuel Bowles and Charles Wadsworth, her part-time surrogate fathers, her desolation will become complete and the lingering Muse will bless her only partially.

Poem 1346 was sent to Samuel Bowles saying, "the paper wanders so I cannot write my name on it, so I give you father's portrait instead."¹⁸

"As summer into Autumn slips
And yet we sooner say
"The Summer" than "the Autumn," lest
We turn the sun away.

"And almost count it an Affront
The presence to concede
Of one however lovely, not
The one that we have loved -
"So we evade the change of years
On one attempting shy
The Circumvention of the Shaft
Of Life's Declivity."

This was written after the death of Edward Dickinson. Emily is attempting to give a picture of the stern austere Edward who refused to let himself go in order to taste the little pleasures that binds life together. She is also laughing at him who tried to evade not only the declining years but also the abundance of life itself. *Summer* is the prime of life and autumn its *Declivity* (decline). It is noteworthy that Emily paints the picture of *Autumn* than *Winter* to portray her father's later years. *Winter* is associated with Death, the picture of freezing and snow elsewhere in her poems. She cannot paint *Winter* for Edward, but Autumn, which gives a promise of future life. None is more aware than this daughter-poet of Edward, the circumferentials of his character. Note what she writes to her Norcross cousins Louise and Fanny, " .........Father has built a new road round the pile of trees between our house and Mr.S-'s, where they can take the soldier's shirt to make, or a sweet poem, and no man find them but the fly, and he such a little man?" 19

Barbara Antonina Clarke Mossberg whose critical work on Emily Dickinson is perpetually concerned with the father-daughter relationship, points out, "This "portrait" is remarkably controlled in terms of emotion and technique for one who is supposedly too distraught by grief to write. The sonnet is a philosophically detached meditation not so much on death as it is on our attitudes towards mortality and old age ...................... I think that Dickinson
therefore is using this poem to indicate that now, at her father's death, she is not intimidated by his power: she sees his weakness, and she almost patronisingly forgives him as she forgives humanity."

The feeling of Awe that accompanied Emily in her relationship with her father - "Gathered into the Earth,/ .................. That lonesome Glory/That hath no omen here - but Awe-"/(Poem 1370) and her awareness of his marble exterior that hid his innermost yearnings so well - "His Heart was darker than the star less night - " (Poem 1378) exposes her helplessness to continue her now exhausted career where still harbours only the thoughts and traits of the overpowering Edward Dickinson.

VII. On Death and Immortality

The central themes in the whole range of Emily Dickinson's poetry are the subjects of Death and Immortality. Her first experience with Death was at the impressionable age of fifteen when her childhood friend Sophia Holland died. After a few years Mr. Leonard Humphrey, her favourite teacher also passed away. Her sorrow intensified when her most sympathetic and intimate friend Benjamin Franklin Newton too perished in 1853. The American Civil war also took its toll of many lives in Amherst. To Emily's sensitivity, she was soon questioning the concept of Death and its aftermath, unlike any other New-England Puritan of the land. In her poetry workshop, more than five hundred poems deal with the subjects. The images and the processes of Death and Immortality is painted with a passionate intensity of emotions that we almost feel that these concepts are two charming and gracious gentlemen who approaches with polite and mild manners. But in certain other poems, the personae of Death and Immortality are
cruel assassins, hired by an Omniscient Tyranny. Nevertheless, to this New-England gentlewoman, who never married, Death was almost a lover, who was a pliable toy in her hands. She toyed with it day and night to produce at once an enlarged and blending vision of the transcendental and earthy beauty.

"Death is the supple Suitor
That wins at last -
It is a stealthy Wooing
Conducted first
By pallid innuendoes
And dim approach
But brave at last with Bugles
And a bisected Coach
It bears away in triumph
To Troth unknown
And kindred as responsive
As Porcelain " (Poem 1445)

The poem was written after the death of Samuel Bowles. If Emily had felt a deep abiding love towards Bowles at any point in her life, her reconciliation at its futility is made complete by this poem. Death has at last claimed Bowles with his stealthy Wooing, defeating the earthly bond with Mrs. Bowles and the unfounded love of Emily Dickinson. Death's triumphant claiming is
well set with Bugles and a bisected Coach bearing away the soul to the dead land of unknown truth. Paradoxically, the truth here is unknown.

In Poem 1503, the poet dwells on the sad thought of loss, old age and death that is fast approaching through the images of the Grave and Eternity. Written in 1880, Emily by this time had already lost the two most loved persons on earth—her father and Bowles. With Edward's death, her inspiration has dimmed and with Samuel's passing, her half buried dream for poetic fame and emotional sustenance has also disappeared. The Crash of her is nothing to the world, but all encompassing for Emily, though externally the difference lies unravelled.

"More than the Grave is closed to me -
The Grave and the Eternity
To which the Grave adheres -
I cling to nowhere till I fall -
The Crash of nothing, yet of all -
How similar appears:"

The brittle nature of man's faith and the unconditional love of God - "How brittle are the piers/On which our Faith does tread" (Poem 1433) the cold Peace that death delivers - "A Chilly Peace infects the Grass" (Poem 1443) shows the oscillating and wandering mind of the poet that has not yet come to terms with the reality of Death and the salvation of Immortality.

"Obtaining but our own Extent
In whatsoever Realm -

"Twas Christ's own personal Expanse

That bore him from the Tomb - (Poem 1543)

"Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light,

Pangless except for us -

Who slowly ford the Mystery

Which thou hast leaped across!" (Poem 1564)

Poems 1543 and 1564 were written after the deaths of two dear persons that touched Emily's life in two different ways - Charles Wadsworth and Gilbert Dickinson respectively. While the former claimed her woman's heart unable to reciprocate, the love between the child Gilbert and his aunt Emily was perfect. Charles Wadsworth enticed her frenzied imagination that produced the great poetic period of the early sixties. Even in death, the spiritual might he possessed in the eyes of Emily is rendered even greater by his direct transport to heaven in the presence of Christ. Emily believed in the salvation of a spiritually strong person as Wadsworth.

The image of a Grave is short lived where Wadsworth's death is concerned - "Within thy Grave! Oh no, but on some other flight-" (Poem 1552). The child-like intimacy with little Gilbert gives her heart the hope of faith, which is still brittle in her,

"The Heart has many Doors -
I can but knock 
For any sweet "Come in"
Impelled to hark-
Not saddened by repulse,
Repast to me
That somewhere, there exists,
Supremacy. -" (Poem 1567)

Till her final day she was slowly fording the Mystery which little Gilbert has leaped across.

Donna Dickenson in her chapter Redemption and Resurrection of Emily's poetry, adds, "But there is one kind of immortality which Dickinson never rejected. The sort she found mentioned in the essay of Higginson's which prompted her to ask him whether her poems 'breathed'." He had written, "'A book is the only immortality,' quoting Choate. This was the resurrection after death in which Dickinson believed most fervently. She died convinced that it had been denied her." 21

References
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2 Richard Benson Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson. P.559
3 Emily Dickinson, Letters..
5 Emily Dickinson, Letters., PP. 159-160
6 R. B. Sewall, The Life., P.474
7 Emily Dickinson, *Letters.*, P.167

8 R.B. Sewall, *The Life.*, P.479

9,10 Emily Dickinson, *Letters.*, Pp.298, 45

11 George Frisbie Whicher, *This was a poet.* PP.101,112

12 Emily Dickinson, *Letters.*, P.305

13 R.B. Sewall, *The Life.*, PP.454, 457, 459


20 Barbara Antonina Clarke Mossberg, *When a Writer is a Daughter*, Pp. 81-82

21 Donna Dickenson, *Emily Dickinson*. P.96